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Aligning Agendas: Drugs, Sustainable Development, and the Drive for Policy Coherence

March 2018

In April 2016 the United Nations General Assembly convened a special session on the world drug problem in order to review and evaluate existing drug control policies and strategies. More specifically, the special session (UNGASS) set out to "review the progress made in the implementation of the Political Declaration and Plan of Action, including an assessment of the achievements and challenges in countering the world drug problem, within the framework of the three international drug control conventions and other relevant United Nations instruments." The UNGASS 2016 outcome document represents the most recent global consensus on drug policy and signals a shift toward placing public health, development, and human rights at its centre.

In the months preceding UNGASS, several civil society organizations and some member States were vocal about the importance of using the special session to reconsider how the success of drug policy is measured. An important part of the reasoning behind this call was that current drug policy too often has a negative impact on communities and runs counter to efforts to ameliorate poverty through sustainable development.

Although the UNGASS 2016 outcome document does not heed this call directly, the preamble does "promote research by States ... to better understand factors contributing to illicit crop cultivation ..., including through the use of relevant human development indicators, criteria related to environmental sustainability and other measurements in line with the Sustainable Development Goals." This paper looks to further this debate, arguing that aligning the way we measure and evaluate drug policies with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will have two clear benefits:

1. It will help overcome many of the limitations of effective drug policies resulting from suboptimal metrics for measuring their impact; and

2. It will help make sure that drug policies enhance, rather than hinder, efforts to achieve the SDGs.

Drug policies therefore need to be designed in coordination with other relevant policy agendas to guarantee that achievements in one agenda do not hinder those in another. In fact, achieving the SDGs will address many of the factors driving vulnerable populations to engage in the illicit drug trade.

As countries design plans of action for implementation of the 2030 Agenda, policymakers should therefore be conscious of the relationship between drug policies and the SDGs to make sure drug policy goals and objectives are not undermining the SDGs. This would go a long way in helping to make drug policy metrics more precise, more complete, and better conceived. This paper therefore puts forward the following recommendations for policymakers:

1. Develop a framework for policy coherence: Drug policies and the SDGs need to be coherent with each other if the SDG targets are to be met by 2030. Toward this end, the Office of the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General should establish a process for developing adequate indicators for Target 17.14 ("enhance policy coherence for sustainable development"). With the support of UNODC and other key agencies, it should also develop a framework for coherence between drug policy and sustainable development, inspired by similar processes such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Framework for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development.

2. Create an external advisory committee: To help the United Nations system monitor the effects of drug policies on progress toward the SDGs, the Office of the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General should create an external advisory

committee bringing together experts on drug policy and sustainable development. This committee could work with governments to assist in the development and application of coherent and appropriate indicators.

3. Add SDG indicators related to drug policy: In the fourth quarter of 2018, the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG) will initiate a comprehensive review of the current indicators. The results will be submitted to the United Nations Statistical Commission to consider and decide on at its 2020 session. The process will be repeated beginning in the fourth quarter of 2023 in advance of the commission's 2025 session. The guidelines for these reviews specify that indicators could be "added, deleted, refined or adjusted" if, among other reasons, additional indicators are needed to cover all aspects of the target or if existing indicators are not effectively measuring progress. The commission should consider adding indicators that are specifically related to drug policy or that contribute to more accurately measuring the impact of drug policy on progress toward the SDGs.

4. Put in place mechanisms to gather data on the effects of drug policies: In the second half of 2017, the United Nations Statistical Commission requested the IAEG "to develop detailed guidelines of how custodian agencies [for the SDGs] and countries can work together to contribute to the data flows necessary to have harmonized statistics" for global reporting of SDG data. In developing these guidelines, the IAEG, as well as the custodian agencies beyond UNODC, could consider putting in place mechanisms for collecting data on the effects of drug policies.

5. Use the SDG indicators as a model for improving drug policy indicators: Independent of the 2030 Agenda, the drug policy community should examine how the SDG indicator framework can serve as a model for similarly ambitious drug policy metrics. A first step would be to improve data collection standards for the indicators used in the annual report questionnaire, which could help these questionnaires evolve to more comprehensively identify whether drug policies are attaining their goals.

6. Prioritize outcome-oriented metrics: When evaluating the impact of drug policies, United Nations Member States should broaden their focus beyond process-oriented metrics that concentrate predominantly on supply and demand. To do this, Member States should take advantage of the process of developing SDG indicators to collect and utilize data that allows them to holistically evaluate drug policies, particularly in relation to policy outcomes.